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## **TERRITORIAL COHESION**

SOME INDICATIONS ABOUT THE CONCEPT AND HOW IT CAN BE PUT INTO PRACTICE

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## INTRODUCTION

Following on from the publication of the Fourth Cohesion Report in September 2007 and the inclusion in the Treaty of Lisbon of territorial cohesion as an objective alongside economic and social cohesion, the European Commission is due to publish a Green Paper on territorial cohesion in September 2008. As territorial cohesion now falls within the Union's primary legislation, the EU institutions and Member States will have an obligation to implement it, just as they were legally obliged to implement economic and social cohesion as a result of the Single Act. This reflection must of course be placed in the wider context of the debate on the reform of the EU budget and the major EU policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy and cohesion policy.

This technical paper, which anticipates the publication of the Green Paper, aims to provide some indications and raise some questions concerning the concept of territorial cohesion and the way in which it can be put into practice. We aim firstly to clarify the meaning of territorial cohesion, which is often confused with other concepts or approaches (1). Secondly we propose a summary framework for reflection which could be useful – and in any event is a very important prior step – in setting-up mechanisms for territorial cohesion which are efficient and consistent at the different spatial levels (2). In conclusion, we raise some political questions that arise from our reflections.

### 1. TERRITORIAL COHESION: BASES OF A DEFINITION

Local and regional government is a basic component of the European identity, and has helped to shape the uniqueness of its model of civilisation and territorial organisation. We should not forget that the great majority of European States have been built up and consolidated, over the centuries, in exchange for the granting of specific franchises and freedoms to certain groups. In the European tradition since the Middle Ages the resources needed to finance external ambitions (the challenge of globalisation today) have always been found at the cost of negotiations that guaranteed the central powers the internal support of sub-state ruling groups. Although this trend towards greater freedoms was somewhat curbed at the high point of the organisation of the European continent into Nation States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the gradual fading of the borders of the European Union has given it a new impetus.

Regionalism and territorial issues are, consequently, eminently political questions. They have long been addressed as such in the Member States. The recognition of the territorial dimension at European level, while more recent and gradual, is nonetheless an illustration of its ongoing force.

The debate before us today is therefore far from being a mere detail in the European landscape: territorial cohesion is well and truly at the heart of the debate.

#### 1.1. TERRITORIAL COHESION REFERS TO MECHANISMS THAT PROMOTE SOLIDARITY BETWEEN THE TERRITORIES AT DIFFERENT SPATIAL SCALES

The concept of "territorial cohesion" is above all a political concept. It is based on the key idea of equity and thus of cohesion between territories at a given scale. The notion of territory can therefore be applied to all scales of public action. It is therefore indeed here a question of:

##### 1) Solidarity

- between States belonging to the same political grouping,
- between Regions belonging to the same political grouping,
- between Regions belonging to the same State (for example the policies of certain States in favour of territories with permanent handicaps),
- between territories belonging to the same Region (for example rural areas in decline inside a particular territory),
- between spaces inside an urban territory (for example policies in favour of urban areas in crisis).

- 2) Equalisation mechanisms that embody this solidarity at the different scales identified. These may be
- legislative mechanisms,
  - budgetary mechanisms,
  - fiscal mechanisms.

Each institutional level, from the European Union down to local authorities, has at its disposal one or more of these tools which it uses in a more or less structured way and with varying degrees of sophistication. As far as we are aware, there is no global vision or reflection concerning the use of these mechanisms. However, for the principle of territorial cohesion to be applied in the EU's policies, a shared understanding of the concept and a precise knowledge of the whole spectrum of mechanisms at work at the different territorial scales is indispensable. These are the conditions for an open and serene political debate which must ask questions about the kind of territorial disparities that need to be addressed, the territorial scale at which each of them should be addressed, and which equalisation mechanism(s) to use.

If we take this definition as given, we have to remind ourselves that the concepts, tools and policies listed below, while they are sometimes closely related to the mechanisms of territorial cohesion and may reinforce its effects, should not be used in place of the concept of territorial cohesion itself.

- Regional policy. In its current form, the EU's regional policy has no need of the concept of territorial cohesion in order to be applied. It is a policy of economic and social cohesion applied at the regional scale. The concept of territorial cohesion may on the other hand enhance regional policy by bringing into consideration the different scales at which this principle is applied. Thus regional policy is one aspect of territorial cohesion, but not the only one.
- The "territorial dimension" of EU policies, which refers to their implementation at different spatial scales without however indicating the slightest need for equalisation, equity, or solidarity mechanisms.
- Territorial cooperation, which is ideally intended to be a tool for generating, at the relevant territorial scales, transfers of experience and, at best, joint or integrated strategies to enhance the territory's development. Given the relatively modest means involved, while territorial cooperation may create consistency between territories, it has neither the vocation nor the capacity to create new scales of solidarity. Moreover, the institutional reality of the spaces concerned is much too embryonic for this to be envisaged.
- "Multi-level governance", which is fundamental in ensuring the efficient delivery of public policies, particularly from a financial point of view, through its requirements for vertical coordination and policy consistency. It is not, however, concerned with solidarity between territories.
- Policy coordination, the cross-sector aspect of multi-level governance.

## 1.2. CRITERIA, MEASURES AND DIAGNOSES, FUNDAMENTAL PREREQUISITES FOR ANY POLITICAL DECISION

Any political decision on territorial cohesion must be preceded by a three-step period of reflection. Each of these steps is far from being purely technical: the choice of indicators and the priority given to each of them is at the very basis of the diagnosis of territorial disparities and must therefore reflect political priorities.

### **1st step: elaboration of measurement criteria**

Any decision must be based on a prior diagnosis of territorial disparities, and this diagnosis is based on a certain number of indicators. The first question consists therefore in deciding which types of disparities we wish to measure.

A certain number of simple criteria exist, such as wealth (measured in GDP), employment (rate of unemployment) or accessibility (to transport networks, energy or information and communication technologies, health and education services, etc.). Do we consider these criteria to be sufficient and satisfactory? Or should other criteria be envisaged (quality of the environment or access to water, for example)?

For each criterion, it is important to ask which is the most appropriate scale of measurement. As an example, in view of the elements of which the "GDP" indicator is comprised, should wealth be measured at the

national, regional, or sub-regional scale? Is it more appropriate to measure access to higher education at the regional or the national level? And so on.

Over the period 2000-2006, the ESPON programme produced a set of detailed studies on some of these criteria. It would be useful to review the criteria already studied and discuss the usefulness and feasibility of elaborating additional criteria. Each criterion deemed to be relevant should, if necessary, be researched in order to ascertain how it could be measured.

### **2nd step: measuring territorial disparities / diagnosis**

The diagnosis of territorial disparities is based not only on the measurement of the above-mentioned criteria, but, more importantly, on their weighting. Much more than a simple statistical choice, it is a matter here of establishing priorities between criteria that will come to reflect political priorities.

### **3rd step: discussion and decision at the political level**

The anticipated complexity of such a diagnosis will of itself raise a certain number of questions on which decisions will have to be taken at a political level:

- which disparities do we choose to address / not to address?
- Given the initial situation, how do we define what would be an "equitable" situation?
- Which equalisation mechanisms should be used to reduce the identified disparities and come closer to an equitable situation?
- What is the role of each tier of public government in accomplishing this mission of solidarity?
- What is the appropriate content and form of intervention by the European level?

## **2. PUTTING IN PLACE CONSISTENT AND EFFICIENT TERRITORIAL COHESION MECHANISMS AT THE DIFFERENT TIERS OF PUBLIC ACTION**

A decision must also be made as to which equalisation measures should be used and at which scale they should be implemented. This decision must be based on a detailed knowledge of the measures that already exist at the different territorial scales. What we know today is that:

- practices vary widely from one Member State to another and from one regional authority to another, and as a result opinions vary widely as to the possible role and consequently the added value of the Community tier in the implementation of territorial cohesion;
- although a number of studies have been made of this subject, knowledge of the mechanisms for equalisation between the territories at different spatial scales is still too fragmented, and this makes any constructive reflection on this topic difficult.

In our view, the minimum core of knowledge should comprise the detailed responses to the following questions:

- what national mechanisms exist to promote interregional solidarity?
- Which criteria does the EU use in allocating regional appropriations?
- What national and regional measures exist to help urban areas in crisis?
- How do urban areas (in their different national forms) set up internal equalisation mechanisms?
- What national and regional measures exist for territories with permanent handicaps (islands, mountain areas, outermost regions, sparsely populated areas)?
- What national and regional measures exist for rural areas in difficulties and mountain areas?
- How can these mechanisms be made to converge?
- How do these criteria apply in terms of the different EU policies, either sectoral (transport, energy, agriculture, environment, employment-training-education, etc.) or horizontal policies (regional policy, competition, rural development)?

Given this situation, could not the ESPON 2013 programme be asked to carry out an interdisciplinary study (involving geographers, economists, tax experts, etc.) on this topic, the results of which could be used as a basis for a real political debate on the question?

## 2.1. PROPOSED SUMMARY FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTION ON THE TERRITORIAL COHESION MECHANISMS AT DIFFERENT SPATIAL SCALES

The table below presents, in summary form, another way of looking at the questions raised in the introduction of this section.

	European Union		Member State			Local / Regional authorities		
	Regulatory	Budgetary	Regulatory	Budgetary	Fiscal	Regulatory	Budgetary	Fiscal
Agricultural policy								
Competition policy  including national regional aid  including sectoral state aid								
Regional policy  including rural development policy  including urban policy								
Transport policy								
Energy policy								

	European Union		Member State			Local / Regional authorities		
	Regulatory	Budgetary	Regulatory	Budgetary	Fiscal	Regulatory	Budgetary	Fiscal
Environment policy								
R & D policy								
Innovation policy								
SGEI/SSCI								
Industrial policy (?)								
Etc.								

## 2.2. TERRITORIAL COHESION MECHANISMS IN EU POLICIES

The Treaty of Lisbon raises the question of what kind of action the EU could take in relation to territorial cohesion. In other words, given the diversity of national and sub-national cohesion mechanisms, what would be the added value of EU intervention?

In this respect, the Islands Commission of the CPMR provides an interesting definition in the final declaration of its 2008 General Assembly: *“the main aim of the concept of territorial cohesion is to allow the different territories of the Union to benefit fairly from the basic freedoms set out in the Treaty and in EU policies, in view of the fact that people’s capacity to travel and their access to goods, capital, services or knowledge is not the same throughout the Union, but relies to a great extent on the geographic or demographic realities within the different territories.”*

This proposed definition raises a certain number of questions which can launch the debate:

- to what extent do the current EU policies actually ensure that all the European territories have the fair access to goods and freedoms that these policies are supposed to guarantee?
- To what extent and in relation to which policies would it be pertinent to take better account of the objective of territorial cohesion? In what way would this benefit the European project as a whole?
- In the absence of EU competence in the area of direct taxation, which regulatory and/or budgetary mechanisms could the Union use to this end?
- How should the subsidiarity principle be applied to the objective of territorial cohesion? In other words, should the EU’s action aim to compensate for the inaction of certain Member States? Should it act as an incentive for the least active Member States to implement territorial cohesion mechanisms? Should it intervene at sub-regional level, and if so, how?

### **2.2.1- EU policies and the objective of territorial cohesion: overview and outlook**

Several examples from national and European experience show that taking account of the specific features of a territory is optimised when the largest possible number of actors are involved in the debate. This leads to intense negotiations, which are only concluded when each participant considers that their particular situation has been satisfactorily taken into account (for example, the setting of energy prices in France, negotiations on national regional aid, etc.). We can deduce from this that it will be on those EU policies that mobilise the largest budgets and are the object of the largest volume of regulations – and which therefore mobilise the greatest number of actors – that a constructive and efficient debate on territorial cohesion can take place.

#### The Common Agricultural Policy and Rural Development Policy

At present, the extent to which the territorial dimension is taken into account in the Common Agricultural Policy is relatively limited. Apart from the second pillar measures which only concern “mountainous areas” (these are defined by the Member State and may be extended to include rural areas in difficulty) and aim to compensate for the difficult conditions of agricultural production in these territories, agricultural and rural aid is still allocated on the basis of essentially production-related criteria; there is no differentiation based on specific local agricultural or rural characteristics.

The conclusions of the ESPON report on the territorial impact of the CAP and rural development policy are clear on this point: the impact of these policies has worked against the European objective of cohesion, and although the situation has improved thanks to a certain number of reforms (notably certain second pillar measures such as LEADER), considerable scope remains for Member States as well as the Commission to make the CAP more consistent with cohesion<sup>1</sup>.

In the context of the reflection on the future of the CAP, it is therefore interesting to ask to what extent strengthening the territorial dimension of this policy would allow for progress to be made in this direction, in particular in the following two scenarios.

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<sup>1</sup> ESPON report 2.1.3 “The Territorial Impact of CAP and Rural Development Policy”, 2005

- A strengthened second pillar of the CAP. This would only be possible if the territorial dimension of this policy were also increased. A “rural” approach, more global and horizontal than the purely sectoral “agricultural” approach, requires that the different aspects – economic, social, environmental – that comprise a given rural territory, be taken into account. From this point of view, the measures related solely to the conditions of agricultural production, that currently exist for mountainous areas, are purely sectoral measures and thus to a large extent ill-adapted and insufficient. ESPON provides some interesting elements concerning the typology of rural areas in Europe and their specific characteristics. These results should be debated in order to give rise to appropriate policy measures.
- Further regionalisation of the first pillar. This can only work if it also includes greater scope for local and regional authorities to negotiate with Member States and the Commission and apply certain territorial cohesion criteria in their territory. The study carried out in 2007 by the CPMR on the Regions’ dependence on the first pillar of the CAP<sup>2</sup> demonstrates the pertinence of such an approach.

In any event, it is necessary to take the debate on the existing tools – ceilings, co-financing, etc. – further.

### Competition policy (national regional aid)

When it was revised in 2005, the framework of national regional aid managed to reconcile the legitimate objective of concentrating and reducing state aid to firms on the one hand, and the objective of economic, social and territorial cohesion on the other hand. After initially making a very liberal proposal, the European Commission eventually modified its proposals, and these ultimately take account – although in an extremely modest way – of the specific characteristics of territories with permanent handicaps, notably the islands, and recognise disparities within the territories eligible under Objective 2 of the Structural Funds.

Although additional measures would have permitted greater territorial equity (calculating aid on a net or gross grant equivalent basis, taking account of the statistical effect for certain territories, bonus rates for territories with permanent handicaps, etc.), this Community framework has at least begun to take account of the necessity to make cohesion compatible with efficiency.

This point needs to be further developed in the future, since the system of state aids is still too rigid in many cases. This is particularly true in the case of territories with severe or permanent geographic or demographic handicaps, where applying special provisions would not distort the functioning of the internal market. We could cite as an example the difficulties encountered recently by the Shetland Islands in using the income from oil-related development to maintain their traditional maritime activities.

### Regional policy

Although it is above all a policy for economic and social cohesion applied at regional level, and not a territorial policy, the cohesion policy does already, to a certain extent, differentiate between territories and promote solidarity. It does so through the use of certain criteria and instruments, such as:

- the classification of regions as Objective 1 or Objective 2 and recognition of the statistical effect;
- the fact that regional appropriations are inversely proportional to the region’s wealth;
- bonuses for the outermost regions.

There is however considerable scope for making cohesion policy fully compatible with the objective of territorial cohesion in the future. Two possible avenues would seem to us to be worth exploring.

- Today, applying the same eligibility criteria to all the regions of the “Regional competitiveness and employment” Objective, notably in the framework of earmarking of funds towards the Lisbon objectives, tends to benefit those regions that are already the most developed. The possibility of taking better account of the inherent potential of each region, by adopting a differentiated approach to the earmarking of funds, could be examined.

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<sup>2</sup> “Europe’s Peripheral Maritime Regions and changes to the CAP – Elements of analysis and discussion concerning the first pillar”, CPMR, 2007

- Although the abandonment of sub-regional zoning for the period 2007-2013 had the great advantage of allowing the inclusion of urban areas in regional-scale projects for the first time, the integration of rural development measures into the Common Agricultural Policy makes coordination between regional and rural development policy more difficult. The consequences of this separation can even result in a situation where some rural areas are not covered, at regional level, either by EAFRD (if the programmes focus on second pillar agricultural-type measures) or ERDF (because it is deemed to come under the EAFRD's remit). Better coordination between these two policies is therefore fundamental if we are to have, at last, a "global" approach to the territories.

This last example also raises the question of how sub-regional disparities are addressed by cohesion policy. Experience shows that the imposition of zoning by the Commission is not satisfactory. Could the answer lie in allowing the Regions to modulate the intervention in their territory in line with its specific characteristics, notably for the most disadvantaged rural areas and urban areas in crisis – through, for example, the possibility of a variable rate of co-financing?

### Transport policy

The question of accessibility is at the crossroads of transport policy and territorial cohesion. The quite legitimate requirement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions has, however, by putting a brake on transport development, also called into question the accessibility of the most isolated regions, island regions and the outermost regions. We need to look at how an acceptable balance between these two requirements can be found, and what kinds of measures can be introduced to reconcile them.

Although Article 154 of the Treaty, on the TEN, explicitly mentions the need to link island, landlocked and peripheral regions with the central regions of the Union, the TEN-T guidelines are an illustration of how little the objective of territorial cohesion has been taken into account in this policy. It is true that several priority projects aim to complete or extend certain road or rail links in isolated areas in the centre of the Union. But a substantial number of these projects – and thus their funding – is aimed at relieving congestion on the pentagon's main transport axes, that is to say in those EU regions that are relatively the most accessible. Lastly, the current format of the Motorways of the Sea (MOS) is in contradiction with the objective of cohesion in that only the major European ports are included in the planned routes. Genuinely taking account of territorial cohesion would require, as the CPMR has been demanding for several years, that in addition to the MOS short sea shipping lines would also link in the medium-sized ports and their hinterlands. However, the limited budget of the TEN-T, added to the difficulties in implementing the network, leave us doubtful about this instrument's real impact, and even the feasibility of its capacity to take account of territorial cohesion criteria.

It is true that EU legislation addresses the issue of accessibility of the most outlying territories in that it recognises the existence of territorial diversity in its provisions for public service obligations or public service contracts on certain routes. But here again, a pragmatic and flexible approach would appear to be necessary, as has been shown by the difficulties encountered with regard to certain maritime services.

### Energy policy

Given the considerable potential of renewable energies, their development is a prime asset for numerous peripheral and maritime regions, including the most outlying. However, in order for the Union's energy policy to be able to make a greater contribution to territorial cohesion, certain difficulties need to be addressed.

Firstly, the networks for exporting energy from renewable sources from these territories need to be adequately developed, and this is far from being the case; the shortcomings in the interconnections between Member States' electricity networks are well known.

Furthermore, the classification of sometimes extremely large surface areas in certain regions as protected areas under environmental legislation can hinder the development of this potential (notably in the wind energy sector, as for example the recent experience in the Western Isles shows). Here again, a balance needs to be found between the requirements of the Union's energy policy, the need to combat the causes of climate change, the aims of a policy of territorial cohesion, and the protection of certain species of flora and fauna.

## R & D policy

The European Union's policy on Research and Development, based on the coordination of European research resources and on European excellence in global research, represents no more than 6% of total research spending in Europe. In this context, is it useful and advisable to add a territorial dimension to this policy? We are not sure that it is.

On the other hand, measures to support innovation, which are included in various different instruments (the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme and the Structural Funds among others), are in themselves territorial. It is therefore concerning these tools that the debate is likely to be the fullest and most interesting.

## Environmental policy

The European Union has a fundamental role in the area of environmental legislation. The range of financial instruments at its disposal is somewhat restricted, however, with the exception of cohesion policy.

Three main challenges lie at the heart of the Union's environmental policy: reducing greenhouse gas emissions, protecting natural resources, and maintaining biodiversity. The territorial dimension of these three challenges is very clear:

- reducing greenhouse gas emissions is such a major challenge that the participation of all actors, including the territories, is necessary;
- the effects of climate change will have different effects on different territories in terms of their access to natural resources, especially water.

Is it feasible to envisage the adoption of new measures in EU environmental legislation that would introduce the notion of territorial equity in the territories' contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and their access to natural resources?

### **2.2.2- EU mechanisms: the budget and EU legislation**

Since it has no direct powers of taxation, the European Union has at its disposal essentially two mechanisms which it can use to implement the criteria of territorial cohesion: the budget and EU legislation.

As far as the budget is concerned, the two main mechanisms are:

- equalisation, i.e. the redistribution of resources in line with certain criteria;
- allocation, i.e. the funding of specific measures (for example to assist rural areas in difficulties, urban areas in crisis, etc.).

Concerning legislation, the two main mechanisms are:

- exemptions from a general scheme (for example state aid to firms is authorised under certain conditions by virtue of Article 87.3 of the Treaty);
- incentive measures, especially by means of tax benefits.

These mechanisms and the various ways in which they can be adapted and associated provide the European Union with considerable powers to take action in implementing the criteria of territorial cohesion within EU policies. An open debate about the different possible actions should make it possible to implement territorial cohesion in the Union efficiently and at the lowest cost.

## CONCLUSIONS

Clarification of the concept of territorial cohesion and the gathering of a body of sound and detailed knowledge about existing tools and the degree to which the objective of territorial cohesion is actually taken into account in public, especially EU, policies, therefore seem to us to be indispensable prerequisites for any political reflection on this subject. The lack of a shared diagnosis and definitions will have no other result than to perpetuate and maintain unfortunate misunderstandings and the unacceptable refusal on the part of political decision-makers to take responsibility or action.

Only in the light of such knowledge can a serious and constructive political debate begin to take place on issues that are vital for the future of the EU, including the question of the “compatibility” of the objective of cohesion and equity with that of the competitiveness of the European Union.

Given the importance of the debate with which we are concerned here, it seems to us important that the European Commission’s Green Paper should open a period of consultation that is long enough to enable as many actors as possible to take on board this complex subject and make contributions of a high quality. It is on this basis that the peripheral maritime Regions will assess the approach and the questions raised in the European Commission’s Green Paper on territorial cohesion, at their General Assembly in Bayonne on 2 and 3 October 2008. A written reaction will then be prepared in the framework of the consultation period.